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Between a rock and a hard spot

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WASHINGTON — When freshman Rep. Charles Wilson arrived in Congress early in January, among the items awaiting him was the responsibility for managing legislation for the proposed Big Thicket National Park in Southeast Texas.

Veteran Rep. Jack Brooks of Beaumont, who handled one version of the thorny proposal last session, gleefully dumped responsibility for the bill on his newly arrived colleague — primarily because the bulk of land being considered for the park lies within Wilson's Second Congressional District.

The move left Wilson, as was succinctly put recently, "between a rock and a hard spot" in trying to pacify determined conservationists who want to preserve what is left of the thicket and timber interests which want to continue cutting the timber.

As the legislative battle for creation of a Big Thicket National Park enters its seventh year, there has been little change from the previous year and not much progress made?

• Both sides appear still to be agreed upon a park of at least 100,000 acres, although Wilson clouded this point last month by suggesting a park of only 60,000 acres.

• Wilson is drafting legislation now to create the park, and his bill — like the one offered by Brooks last year — is expected to have the backing of a sizeable majority of the Texas Congressional Delegation.

• Houston Rep. Bob Eckhardt is preparing his own version of the park proposal — a bill which, as it did last year, will have the backing of conservationists — calling for 100,000 acres to be set aside and preserved. This will be essentially the same measure he proposed in 1972 but modified slightly after he sees what areas are still standing, an aide said.

• Sen. Lloyd M. Bentsen Jr., D-Tex., has reintroduced a bill calling for a 100,000-acre park but letting the Park Service and the Interior Department decide where those acres are.

• Sen. John G. Tower, R-Tex., remains committed to the 100,000-acre park concept but apparently is going to introduce whatever bill the Nixon administration, through the Interior Department, proposes.

• The Interior Department, after years of dragging its feet and changing its mind on the Big Thicket, remains officially "undecided" on

what it will propose, according to a spokesman.

• Two other freshmen congressmen — Alan Steelman of Dallas, a Republican, and Dale Milford of Grand Prairie, a Democrat — have indicated they will offer Big Thicket bills, too. Steelman is expected to be the House sponsor of whatever bill Sen. Tower proposes, and Milford has introduced Sen. Bentsen's bill in the House.

It appears the crunch will come between the Eckhardt and Wilson bills, since the Eckhardt plan represents the wishes of conservationists, and the Wilson plan is expected to be more acceptable to timber interests and real estate developers.

"We are going to put our bill in again and will fight all the way for it," an Eckhardt aide declared late last week.

The outstanding point of disagreement between the two measures will be Eckhardt's so-called "corridors" concept — strips of up to 1,000 feet wide on either side of major stream beds linking various sections of the park. Under his proposal, these corridors would remain in their natural state, free of any timber cutting and — more importantly — free of real estate development.

Corridors would protect streams by keeping real estate interests from subdividing the stream banks, selling off the land for vacation homesites and constructing septic tanks along the water's edge.

"THESE DEVELOPERS would just love to sell the people of Houston lots of a third of an acre along those streams near a park," said an Eckhardt aide.

But an aide to Wilson branded the corridor concept impractical and said it would be necessary to control the entire watershed of streams — and not just up to 1,000 feet on either side — to keep them from being polluted.

"Interior (Department) is said to oppose it, too," said the Wilson aide. "They feel the thousand feet on either side of a bank is not enough of a buffer or a zone of transition."

The Eckhardt aide acknowledged the Interior Department's opposition to the corridors but said the federal agency had supported the idea only a year ago. He declined to speculate about the cause of the abrupt about-face.

"It's interesting that when Eckhardt put in his 100,000-acre bill last year, all the Interior (Department) maps followed his," said the aide. "That includes the corridors."

"THE CONGRESSMAN was quite excited changed their thinking and haven't explained it."

The corridors would constitute about 30,000 of the proposed 100,000 acres in park area under Eckhardt's proposal.

Under the bill which Wilson is said to be considering, those corridors would be eliminated, but the other areas would be expanded by 30,000 acres so the net result would remain 100,000 acres.

This would help pacify timber and real estate interests, which want an unobstructed access to the streams, and hopefully would be acceptable to conservationists by enlarging the preserved areas, such as the Lance Rioser unit near Saratoga.

Wilson also said he wants to include at least one corridor along the Neches River in his plan. The effect of including any corridor in a park would be to keep it free and open to the public in general — just as Texas' beaches are.

INACTION BY THE Nixon administration has been a major obstacle to passage of a Big Thicket bill.

Despite a promise by Interior Secretary Rogers C. B. Morton during an October, 1971, trip to Houston to "keep the pressure on" for creation of a park, the administration remains guilty of dynamic inaction.

"To me, this is just one of their ways of killing the whole thing just by dragging their feet," said a pessimistic congressional source.

"This is a classic example of how to hamstring the will of the Congress. There are 435 members of the House, and they are buffaloed by one guy," he continued.

"Richard Nixon is vetoing the Big Thicket National Park (by keeping the Interior Department from making any formal recommendation on it). The House simply is going to have to pass a bill without that report. That's what the Senate finally had to do," he said.

THE INTERIOR Department continued late last week to hold its cards close to its vest and make no public comment about its ideas on the shape and size of the park.

But one congressional source said the department has completed a set of maps pinpointing areas the staff thinks should be preserved. The maps, however, have not been approved by Secretary Morton or the White House.

"They are very up-tight about it," said the source. "Even the guys who drew it won't talk."

Despite this, an Eckhardt aide said chances of passage of the bill in the House this year are greatly improved over last year.

For one thing, hearings by the House Interior Committee were held in Texas last June, and testimony from them will be applied to consideration of this year's batch of bills.

"We won't have to hold House hearings again," he said.

Secondly, the House Interior Committee, which is in charge of all park legislation, has a new chairman — Rep. James A. Haley, D-Fla. — who is considered more conservation-minded than his predecessor, Rep. Wayne Aspinall, D-Colo., who was defeated for re-election last year chiefly on environmental issues.

HALEY DISAGREES with Aspinall's philosophy of multiple-use of parks. "I think the chief role of the committee . . .

is to protect the natural resources of our nation, to see that they are not destroyed.

It remains, as an aide to Sen. Bentsen noted, to get the Congress to accept the idea of a Big Thicket National Park. The Senate, which passed a bill by former Sen. Ralph W. Yarborough, D-Tex., in 1970, has and is likely to again.

The House has yet to be given a chance to consider the proposal.

Also clouding the Big Thicket's chances is yet another important consideration: The tight spending restrictions the Nixon administration has clamped on the Congress by refusing to release funds for various projects, even though the money may have been appropriated.

CREATION OF ANOTHER national park is not high on the list of this administration's spending priorities.

"I think we can get the Big Thicket authorization bill through this year," said the optimistic Eckhardt aide. "But getting the appropriation is another matter."

Estimates of the cost of the park vary between \$60 million and \$100 million.

Meanwhile, Congressman Wilson continues to mull over his dilemma of trying to please both sides. The nature of his bill will be watched closely by all concerned because, before coming to Congress, he was an employee of Temple Industries, a major producer of timber in East Texas.

He ruffled conservationists' feathers in mid-February when he suggested publicly he was considering a park as small as 69,000 acres. Backers of the 100,000-acre park say this represents a further retreat from the compromise reached last year and a move toward the unacceptable 35,000-acre "String of Pearls" concept first advanced by timber interests seven years ago.

"THAT 100,000 ACRES is a compromise in itself, said the Eckhardt aide. "We started out two years ago at 191,000 acres and compromised last year on 100,000 acres.

"Now he wants to come down to 69,000 acres as a compromise, but we are not going to budge," he said.

"The opposing forces are so demanding in their viewpoints that I don't know that I'll ever be able to accomplish any consensus, but I'm certainly trying," said Wilson in a recent interview.

"I'm hoping for a compromise, but all I'll probably accomplish is make everybody mad," he said.